

MARY SHELLEY



HER LIFE

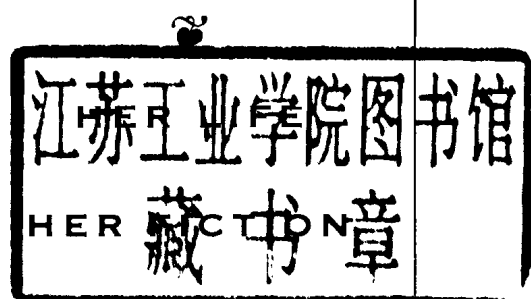
HER FICTION

HER MONSTERS

ANNE K. MELLOR



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FRONTISPIECE

The Frontispiece for *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831),
British Museum Library

PLATE I

"Mary Wollstonecraft," by John Opie, c. 1797,
National Portrait Gallery, London

PLATE II

"William Godwin," by James Northcote, 1802,
National Portrait Gallery, London

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"Percy Bysshe Shelley," by Amelia Curran, 1819,
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"Claire Clairmont," by Amelia Curran, 1819,
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Museums, England

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"George Gordon, Lord Byron," by Richard Westall,
1813, National Portrait Gallery, London

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Manuscript of *Frankenstein*, folio pages 106 and
203. Abinger Shelley Collection: Abinger Dep. c.
534, Bodleian Library, Oxford

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“Le Peuple Mangeur du Rois,” engraving from
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photograph by Lynn Hunt

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“The Nightmare,” by Henry Fuseli, Detroit Institute
of Fine Art

For most of this century, Mary Shelley's writings have been explored primarily for the light they can throw on the poetic and intellectual development of her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Jean de Palacio's full-length study of her thought and art, *Mary Shelley dans son oeuvre* (1969), typically assumed that she was in effect the product of Percy Shelley's ideas and explores "bien sûr, son obédience intellectuelle à la pensée de Shelley et la connaissance intime qu'elle avait de son oeuvre" (16). And William Veeder's recent Freudian/Lacanian analysis of androgyny and erotic bifurcation in *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein* (1986) persists in reading Mary Shelley primarily in relation to her husband's personality and ideas.

With the single exception of *Frankenstein*, none of her novels has received extensive critical discussion, and even *Frankenstein* has traditionally been excluded from the established academic canon. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, editing a distinguished group of essays on *Frankenstein* in 1979, felt compelled to defend the academic legitimacy of their project against both those who crudely believe that *Frankenstein* is nothing more "than an adolescent flight that has somehow managed to cash in clumsily on popular traditions" and those "more serious readers" who dismiss the book as an "unself-conscious and accidental" literary act (*The Endurance of Frankenstein*, xii-xiii).

But in the last fifteen years, feminist and psychoanalytic critics—led by Ellen Moers and Marc Rubenstein and culminating in the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Mary Poovey, and Margaret Homans—have radically revised both our understanding of the originality and complexity of *Frankenstein* and our critical estimation of its value. *Frankenstein* is rapidly becoming an essential text for our exploration of female consciousness and literary technique.

My book is an attempt to contribute further to this process of critical revision. By examining the entire range of Mary Shelley's life and writings, I hope to create a better understanding of the development of Mary Shelley's career, of her literary strengths and

intellectual concerns. By taking into account as yet unpublished archival materials in the Abinger Shelley Collection in the Bodleian Library and by paying more attention to the contemporary cultural influences on her work, I hope to clarify the subtle ways in which Mary Shelley's fictions criticize the dominant romantic and patriarchal ideologies of her day. In their place, Mary Shelley offered a more life-supporting ideology grounded on a new conception of the bourgeois family as ideally egalitarian. However, her commitment to the preservation of the bourgeois family posed problems for women, problems which her fictions acknowledge.

Because of her historical circumstances, Mary Shelley was throughout her childhood deprived of a loving nuclear family. She desperately sought to create such a family, both in her life and in her fiction. In *Frankenstein* she analyzed the disastrous consequences of the absence of a nurturing parent or supportive family. In her subsequent novels she idealized the benevolent and democratically structured bourgeois family. But even as she did so, she registered her contradictory consciousness that the egalitarian family she craved might not be possible, at least not in the world of nineteenth-century middle-class England to which she belonged. I argue that the fundamental tension in Mary Shelley's writing is not so much the "ambivalence with regard to female self-assertion"—or conflict between the desire to be an original romantic writer and the social requirement to be a modest, decorous lady—which Mary Poovey described so powerfully in her path-breaking *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984). Rather, it is the more profound contradiction inherent in the very concept of an egalitarian bourgeois family promoted in Mary Shelley's fiction. For the bourgeois family is founded on the legitimate possession and exploitation of property and on an ideology of domination—whether of the male gender over the female or of parents over children—that render it innately hierarchical.

Since Mary Shelley's critique of romantic and patriarchal ideologies is sweeping in its implications, I have found myself drawing on insights and interpretive methods garnered from a wide range of sources: Self-in-Relation psychology (developed in the recent work of Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and Jean Baker Miller), feminist critical theory, cultural anthropology, Marxism, and the new historicism. I have tried to weld these disparate but often mutually enriching approaches and disciplines into a coherent reading of Mary Shelley's life and work. In the face of recent deconstructive critical theory, I have continued to assume that it is not "language" that speaks but rather "authors" that speak. But I am thinking of the author in Bakhtinian terms, as the nexus of a "dialogue" of conflicting ideological discourses

or allegiances produced by sex, class, nationality, and specific economic, political, and familial conditions. In this book, then, "Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley" is both a historical person lost in time and a subject constituted by a complex configuration of fictional writing, nonfictional discourse (letters, journals), and intertextual references (to the discourse of her parents, husband, friends, peers, and other authors of literary, political, and scientific texts). Because I believe that language both responds to and structures a pre-existent material reality and that any ideology is a complex and contradictory system of representations which conditions our conscious experience of ourselves both as individual subjects and as participants in various personal relationships and social institutions, I have devoted much of this book to tracking the unique biographical situations that produced the ideology of the bourgeois family so problematically celebrated in Mary Shelley's fiction.

I begin with an account of Mary Shelley's childhood and romance with Percy Shelley, then turn to an examination of her first novel, *Frankenstein*, paying careful attention in my third chapter to the changes that Percy Shelley made to his wife's manuscript. After considering the several ideological issues at stake in this, Mary Shelley's greatest novel, I turn to her later works, identifying the ways in which *Mathilda* and *The Last Man* wrestle with both her personal and political obsessions. My final chapter is devoted to those works—*Mathilda*, *Valperga*, *Lodore*, and *Falkner*—which most strikingly manifest the contradictions inherent in Mary Shelley's idealization of the bourgeois family.

A final note on her name. Before her marriage to Percy Bysshe Shelley on 30 December 1816, Mary always referred to herself as Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. After her marriage, she dropped Godwin and, in continuing homage to her mother, signed her letters as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley or MWS. Her father's Diary entries after 1817 also refer to his daughter as MWS (with some significant exceptions discussed in the text). I have therefore adopted the practice initiated by Betty T. Bennett in her authoritative edition of Shelley's letters and referred to the subject of this book, after her marriage at the age of nineteen, as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All scholars of the Godwin and Shelley families owe an enormous debt to Lord Abinger, who has generously deposited his invaluable collection of Shelley and Godwin manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford University. I am particularly grateful to Lord Abinger for permission to quote from as yet unpublished materials in the Abinger Shelley Collection. The University of Wisconsin Press and the Indiana University Press have generously granted permission to reprint materials in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively. And I wish once again to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for the support that enabled me to undertake this book.

In my effort to understand Mary Shelley's life and work, I have been greatly helped by several scholars who gave generously of their time and knowledge: Nina Auerbach, Margaret Homans, George Levine, Don Locke, Morton Paley, Donald H. Reiman, Patsy Stoneman, Alexander Welsh, and especially William Veeder, Susan Wolfson, and Ruth Bernard Yeazell. Amy Gustafson has been an invaluable research assistant. For his continuing support and affection, I once again thank Ron Mellor. To the two people who taught me most about motherhood, my mother and my son, I dedicate this book with love and gratitude.

1797

March 29: Mary Wollstonecraft, age 38, marries William Godwin, age 41, at St Pancras church in London.

August 30: Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin gives birth to Mary Godwin.

September 10: Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin dies of puerperal fever.

1801

December 21: William Godwin marries the widow Mrs. Mary Jane Clairmont. She and her two children, Charles and Jane, join William, Mary and Fanny Godwin, the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay, at Godwin's home in the Polygon, Somers Town, a suburb of London.

1805

William and Mary Jane Godwin open a publishing firm (M. Godwin and Co.) and bookshop for children's books.

1810

The Godwin Juvenile Library publishes Mary Godwin's verse poem, "Mounseer Nongtongpaw."

1812

January: Percy Bysshe Shelley writes a self-introductory letter to Godwin, assuming the role of disciple to the philosopher.

June: Mary travels to Scotland to stay with the Baxter family, acquaintances of William Godwin.

October: Percy Shelley and his wife, Harriet, meet and dine with the Godwins at Skinner Street.

November 10: Mary returns to London with Christy Baxter.

November 11: First meeting between Percy and Mary when the Shelleys dine with the Godwins.

1813

Mary again lives in Dundee, Scotland, with the Baxters.

1814

March 30: Mary returns to London.

May 5: Percy Shelley dines at Skinner Street, and sees Mary for the second time. They begin spending nearly every day together.

June 26: Mary declares her love for Percy Shelley at her mother's grave in St Pancras churchyard.

Chronology

July 28: Mary and Percy flee to France, Mary's stepsister Jane (later called Claire) accompanies them. Godwin denounces his daughter.

August: Percy, Mary, and Jane travel through France from Calais to Switzerland. Financial troubles force the trio to return to England.

September 13: Percy, Mary, and Jane arrive in London where they are plagued by financial troubles. When Sir Bysshe, Percy's grandfather, dies, Percy begins negotiations concerning his inheritance which continue throughout his life.

1815

February 22: Mary gives birth prematurely to a baby girl called Clara.

March 6: Mary's baby dies.

August: Percy and Mary send Claire to stay with friends and set up house alone in Bishopsgate.

1816

January 24: Mary's son William is born.

April: Claire is successful in her pursuit of Lord Byron, and becomes his mistress.

May 3–14: Mary, baby William, Percy, and Claire travel to Switzerland to join Lord Byron on Lake Geneva, where Byron and Shelley meet for the first time.

June: Lord Byron leases the Villa Diodati at Coligny, and the Shelley entourage moves into a nearby cottage.

June 15–17: The group engages in discussions about philosophy and the principle of life, and the ghost stories are proposed. On June 16 Mary has her "waking dream" which becomes the germ of *Frankenstein*, and she begins to write her story.

September 8: Mary, William, Percy, and Claire return to England.

October 9: Fanny Godwin commits suicide and is buried anonymously, Godwin having refused to identify or claim the body.

December 10: Harriet Shelley's body, advanced in pregnancy, is found in the Serpentine river, where she had drowned herself.

December 30: Mary Godwin marries Percy Shelley at St Mildred's church in London.

1817

January 12: Claire gives birth to a baby girl, called Alba (later christened Allegra Alba).

March 17: Percy is denied custody of his and Harriet's two children. There is no evidence that Percy ever saw them again.

March 18: Percy, Mary, William, Claire, and Alba move into Albion House at Marlow.

May 14: Mary finishes *Frankenstein*.

September 1: Mary gives birth to a daughter, Clara Everina.

December: Mary publishes *History of a Six Weeks Tour*.

1818

March: *Frankenstein* is published.

March 12: The Shelley entourage departs for Italy, to aid Percy's health and to deliver Allegra Alba to Byron.

April–June: The group finally settles in Bagni di Lucca. Alba is sent to Byron in Venice. Mary begins researching her novel on Castruccio, the Prince of Lucca (later published as *Valperga*).

Chronology

August 17: Percy accompanies Claire to Venice to see Byron and her ill daughter.

August 31: Mary hastily departs from Bagni di Lucca at Percy's demand to join him in Venice.

September 24: Clara dies from a fever exacerbated by the rushed journey across Italy.

December 28: Elena Adelaide Shelley, the possible daughter of Percy Shelley and their Swiss nursemaid Elise, is born in Naples.

1819

June 7: Mary's son William dies of malaria and is buried in the Protestant cemetery at Rome.

August: At Leghorn, Mary writes *Mathilda*, which is not published in her lifetime.

October: Mary and Percy move to Florence.

November 12: Birth of Percy Florence, the only one of their children to survive.

1820

January 27: The Shelleys arrive in Pisa.

September: Mary begins writing *Valperga*.

1821

January 16: Edward and Jane Williams arrive in Pisa and soon become close friends of the Shelleys. During the following year, Percy becomes especially fond of Jane.

January–February: Percy befriends Emilia Viviani, for whom he writes *Epipsychidion*.

June: Mary completes the second volume of *Valperga*.

1822

April: Allegra Alba dies of typhus fever.

May: The Shelleys and Claire move to the Casa Magni in La Spezia. Percy's boat, the *Don Juan*, arrives.

June 16: Mary miscarries during her fifth pregnancy. Percy saves her from bleeding to death by putting her in an ice bath.

July 8: Percy Shelley and Edward Williams set sail in a storm in the *Don Juan* and are found drowned ten days later.

September: Mary moves to Genoa. Claire joins her brother, Charles, in Vienna and spends most of the remainder of her life on the continent in various posts as a governess and companion. Jane Williams returns to London.

1823

August: Mary and Percy Florence arrive in England and move into lodgings in Brunswick Square. Mary sees Jane Williams frequently.

August 29: Mary sees H. M. Milner's *Frankenstein, or, The Demon of Switzerland* at the Royal Coburg Theatre.

September–December: *Valperga* is published. Mary collects and edits Percy's unpublished poems into a volume, *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, then recalls the unsold copies at the insistence of Sir Timothy Shelley.

1824

February: Mary begins writing *The Last Man*.

Chronology

April 19: Byron dies at Missolonghi in Greece.

June 21: Mary moves to Kentish Town to be close to Jane Williams.

1825

June: Mary refuses an offer of marriage from John Howard Payne, an American actor-manager and friend of Washington Irving.

1826

February: *The Last Man* is published.

September: Harriet's son Charles dies and Percy Florence becomes heir to the family estates. Mary's allowance from Sir Timothy Shelley is doubled to 200 pounds per year.

1827

April–July: Jane Williams moves in with Thomas Jefferson Hogg. Their daughter, Mary Prudentia, is born in November.

July 13: Mary discovers Jane Williams's betrayal of her trust.

1828

January: Mary begins researching and writing *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*.

March: Mary writes "The Sisters of Albano" for *The Keepsake*, the first of fourteen stories that she will publish in this annual between 1828 and 1838. Percy Florence begins his formal education at Edward Slater's Gentleman's Academy in Kensington.

April: Mary visits friends in Paris and contracts smallpox.

June–July: Mary recovers by the sea at Dover and Hastings.

1829

May: Mary settles at Portman Square, where she remains until April 1833.

1830

May: *Perkin Warbeck* is published by Colburn and Bentley.

1831

January–February: Mary begins writing *Lodore*.

June: Mary refuses a partially jesting offer of marriage from Edward Trelawny, a friend from her days in Italy with Percy.

November: 1831 revised edition of *Frankenstein* is published by Bentley and Colburn in their Standard Novels series.

1832

September 29: Percy Florence enters Harrow.

1833

April: Mary moves to Harrow to limit the expenses of boarding Percy at school and allow him to continue his education.

1834

May: Mary rewrites part of *Lodore*, a section of the manuscript having been lost in the mail or by the publishers.

1835

February: Volume I of the *Lives of . . . Eminent Literary . . . Men of Italy, Spain and Portugal* for Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopedia series is published. Mary contributed the lives of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Machiavelli.

March: *Lodore* is published.

October: Volume II of the *Lives* is published. Mary wrote the lives of Metastasio, Goldoni, Alfieri, Monti, and Foscolo.

1836

April: Mary engages a tutor for Percy and moves back to London.

April 7: William Godwin dies of catarrhal fever and is buried with Mary Wollstonecraft in St Pancras churchyard.

1837

Falkner is published by Saunders and Otley. Volume III of the *Lives* is published, including essays by Mary on Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Calderón.

October 10: Percy enters Trinity College, Cambridge.

1838

July: *Lives of the most Eminent . . . Men of France* (1838–39), Volume I, is published, with Mary's essays on Montaigne, Rabelais, Corneille, Rouche-foucauld, Molière, La Fontaine, Pascal, Mme de Sévigné, Racine, Boileau, and Fénelon.

1839

January–May: Volumes I through IV (final volume) of Percy Shelley's *Poetical Works* with notes by Mary are published at monthly intervals. Volume II of *Lives of . . . Men of France* is published, with Mary's essays on Voltaire, Rousseau, Condorcet, Mirabeau, Mme Roland and Mme de Staël.

November: Mary's edition of Percy Shelley's *Essays, Letters* is published.

1840

June–September: Mary spends two months at Lake Como with Percy and his friends.

1841

January: Percy Florence graduates from Cambridge University.

1842

June: Mary and Percy spend the summer in Germany and the winter and spring in Italy.

1843

July 10: Mary returns to England with Percy, stopping to visit Claire in Paris.

1844

Rambles in Germany and Italy is published. Sir Timothy Shelley dies and the heavily indebted estate passes to Percy Florence.

Chronology

1848

June: Percy Florence marries Jane St John.

1849

Mary moves into Field Place, the Shelley country home in Bournemouth, Sussex, with Percy and Jane.

1850

Mary spends the winter in Chester Square, suffering from nervous attacks and partial paralysis. Percy and Jane attend her diligently and affectionately.

1851

February 1: Mary Shelley dies at age 53. She is buried between the transferred remains of her mother and father in St Peter's churchyard, Bournemouth.

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